Good Talk About Good Teaching

Improving Teaching through Conversation and Community

By Parker J. Palmer

After 25 years of teaching undergraduates, graduates, and older adults, I am still trying to fathom the mystery of how people do and do not learn. I have been edified by research on the subject and by experts who share what they know. But, like most college faculty, I have often been deprived of a deep reservoir of insight about teaching and learning. Faculty, unlike many other professionals, lack the continuing conversation with colleagues that could help us grow more fully into the demands of the teacher's craft.

No surgeon can do her work without being observed by others who know what she is doing, without participating in grand–round discussions of the patients she and her colleagues are treating. No trial lawyer can litigate without being observed and challenged by people who know the law. But professors conduct their practice as teachers in private. We walk into the classroom and close the door–figuratively and literallyñon the daunting task of teaching. When we emerge, we rarely talk with each other about what we have done, or need to do. After all, what would we talk about?

This privatization of teaching may originate in some misguided concept of academic freedom but it persists, I believe, because faculty choose it as a mode of self–protection against scrutiny and evaluation. Ironically, this choice of isolation leads to some of the deepest dissatisfactions in academic life. I visit dozens of campuses each year to lead faculty workshops on teaching and learning, and I often hear about the "pain of disconnection" among faculty, the pain

of people who were once animated by a vision of "the community of scholars" but who now find themselves working in a vacuum.

This pain takes quite specific forms. For example, many faculty suffer from the common institutional practice of evaluating teaching with a standardized questionnaireñone that forces all teaching into a Procrustean bed by reducing it to ten dimensions on a fivepoint scale. The nuances of good teaching cannot possibly be captured this way. But if we insist on privatizing our work, how else can administrators evaluate us except by tossing some questionnaires over the transom at the end of each term and hoping that students will make marks on them?

Privatization creates more than individual pain; it creates institutional incompetence as well. By privatizing teaching we make it next to impossible for the academy to become more adept at its teaching mission. The growth of any skill depends heavily on honest dialogue among those who are doing it. Some of us may grow by private trial and error, but our willingness to try and to fail is severely limited when we are not supported by a community that encourages such risks. The most likely outcome when any function is privatized is that people will perform the function conservatively, refusing to stray far from the silent consensus or what "works"ñeven when it clearly does not. That, I am afraid, too often describes the state of teaching in the privatized academy.

The good news is that the academy's resources are considerable, a fact I rediscover on virtually every campus I visit. Much of what we need in order to foster good teaching can be generated by any faculty worth its saltñand there are manyñthrough continuing, thoughtful conversation. The question is, how can we help that conversation happen? I want to explore three elements that seem essential to creating a community of discourse about teaching and learning: *leaders* who expect and invite conversation, topics of conversation that can take us beyond technique, and *ground rules* that keep us from defeating ourselves before our conversation begins.

Our Need for Leadership

On a recent visit to a college that bills itself as a "teaching institution," I found, as I often do, that this phrase has its limits. This college hires people who care about teaching, it gives student opinion real weight in making decisions about promotion and tenure, and its official rhetoric is full of exhortations about teaching and learning. But the college does not have regular occasions for its faculty to explore teaching with each other, except for an annual workshop where the emphasis is on learning from an outside expert rather than from colleagues.

When I observed a need to create more opportunities for "good talk about good teaching," one person spoke, with all earnestness, what seemed to be the mind of many: "I'd like to talk with my colleagues about teaching, but I feel awkward about walking into someone's office and saying,

ëLetís dicuss the various learning styles among our students.í"

What strikes me about that comment (in addition to the evidence of privatization it provides) is how subtly it reveals the weak culture of leadership in academy. The comment assumes that cultivating a conversation about teaching depends entirely on the wills and wiles of individual professors; there's nary a hint that academic leadership might play some role in fostering such conversation. The comment reveals a kind of silent conspiracy between faculty who do not want to be led and executives who find it safer to administer than to lead.

But very little talk about teachingñgood or otherwiseñwill happen if presidents and provosts, deans and department chairs, do not expect and invite it into being on a regular basis. I chose my words carefully, because leadership that tries to coerce conversation will fail. Conversation must be the free choice of free people. But in the Privatized academy, conversation will happen only as people are surrounded by expectations and invitations from leaders about new ways to use their freedom. The most powerful kind of leadership is to offer people pathways and permissions to do things they want to do but feel unable to do for themselves. That sort of leadership evokes energies within people that far exceed the powers of

coercion.

I first learned about this kind of leadership as a community organizer working on white racism. The whites in our community, contrary to their racist reputation, wanted to have a humane dialogue with their new black neighbors, but, having no idea how to create that conversation, sank into deeper and deeper isolation from the newcomers and into the racism that isolation breeds. The leadership task in that community was to offer excuses for those conversations to happen, and so we didñby offering "Living Room Seminars" on coping with community change, by creating something we called the "Community Foundation" as a forum for discussion, by sending people door–to–door to collect public opinion data with the implicit purpose of giving them a way to meet their new neighbors, etc.

Of course, this kind of leadership depends on our ability to look beyond the masks people wear and into their true condition. Some faculty may wear a mask of indifference about teaching, but the best academic leaders know that beneath the mask there may be real concernñif only because most faculty spend so many hours in the classroom that self–interest cries out for those hours to be made more fruitful. And beyond narrow self–interest, there are reasons to care about teaching that are rooted deep in the human soul. "Teaching" is simply another word for the ancient and elemental bond that exists between the elders of the tribe and their young. When the bond is broken, both groups feel fearful and incomplete, and both will wish to reweave the relationship, no matter how profoundly alienated they may be.

Experience tells me not only that there is a deep reservoir of insight about teaching among faculty, but also that faculty have a deep need to draw upon that life–giving source. The reservoir waits to be tapped by leaders who perceive its presence, who expect and invite people to draw upon it, who offer excuses and permissions for the dialogue to happenñand who can help make that dialogue less woeful than it sometimes is and as winsome as it can easily be.

Good Teaching Is More Than Technique

Last fall, minutes before I was to begin a two−day workshop on teaching with some 200 faculty at an urban university, a large and angry−looking man strode up to me, glared, and said, "I am an organic chemist. Are you going to spend the next two days telling me that I have to teach organic chemistry through role−playing?"

His anger (humorous in retrospect, but a bit dismaying in the moment) reflects one factor that has made our discourse about teaching more woeful than winsome: our constant habit of reducing teaching to "how−to−do−it" questions. We share an American cultural bias that every problem we face has a technical "fix," if only we can find it. That bias is fostered by armies of experts who make a living "fixing" things. But at its source, the bias is created by our penchant for evading the human challenges of selfhood and community by seeking refuge in the safer, technical dimension of things.

When we frame our talk about teaching only in terms of technique, we may make the conversation "practical" and safe, but we miss the deeper dimensions that could make such talk more real and rewarding to faculty: the challenge of ideas, the exploration of shared practice, the uniqueness of each teacher's genius, the mystery at the heart of the educational exchange. If leaders want to create a new conversation about teaching, they must find topics that do not exclude technique but that take us into realms more truthful, more demanding, more productive of insightñtopics that do not deny the need for technical knowledge but that bring us into a community of discourse fed by the richness of our corporate experience.

From the myriad topics that emerge once one starts looking deeper than technique, I want to describe four that I have found effective in my work with faculty:

- *critical moments* in teaching and learning,
- the *human condition* of teachers and learners,
- *metaphors and images* of what we are doing when we teach,

and

- *autobiographical reflection* on the great teachers who helped bring us into academic life.

Critical moments. In some of my workshops with faculty, we explore classroom practice using a simple device that allows us to talk about methods in the context of larger meanings, not ignoring technique but avoiding the dangers of a "fix–it" approach. I draw a large arrow from left to right through the center of the board and ask people to start naming the "critical moments" they have experienced as a course moves from beginning to end. I define a critical moment as one when a learning opportunity will either open up or shut down for your studentsñdepending, in part, on how you respond. (The "in part" is important because not all critical moments are under the teacher's control.)

The moments are many and marvelous. The first day of class, or even the first 15 minutes, are often mentioned. So are the first "stupid" question, the first graded assignment, the first time the teacher is challenged. Equally as critical as these moments of tension and dissension are moments of a more positive sort: the moment when the class seems to "get it," the moment when students start talking to each other rather than to the teacher alone, the moment when the teacher's carefully planned agenda gets derailed in favor of something more important.

As we brainstorm these moments, and locate them on the time line with a word or two, a simple but vital thing happens. People start speaking openly about events that have perplexed and troubled and defeated them in classroom teachingñand also about those they have managed and mastered and turned into teachable moments. That is, they do the one thing most necessary if we are to help each other grow as teachers: they speak honestly with each other about how challenging it is to teach and to learn.

The "critical moments" time line invites honesty by being utterly nonjudgmental. It soon becomes evident that in this conversation, no one is going to say what should or should not happen in other people's classrooms (and if they do, I ask them to stop), but

everyone is invited to tell it like it is for themselves. As the conversation continues, and as the moments get recorded on the line, the board soon evolves into a "map" of the classroom learning experience that everyone has helped to draw, that has all of us reflecting on the educational journey, that reminds us of how many different starting points, routes, and destinations that journey can embrace. Everyone can feel both honored and challenged in his or her own teaching style.

As the map–making slows down, we choose three or four of the most important critical moments and we talk to each other about what we have done in those momentsñfor better and for worse. The choices are somewhat predictable; e.g., the first class meeting, the first grade given, a key idea that remains opaque, a moment of overt conflict. But what faculty say to each other about what they have done, and might do, in those moments is marvelously unpredictable. There is no "right way" to handle these problems. In this dialogue, one has the empowering experience of reflecting on practice with fellow teachers in a way that deepens one's feel for the situation and makes one's practice stronger.

The critical moments exercise creates what I have come to call a "triangulating" conversation, as in surveying or navigation. It allows us to plot our own locations as teachers by relating to the locations of others. As we listen to others speak about their teaching, we are free to say an inward "yes" to the things that sound like us and "no" to the things that do not. We are free to speak about our own practice in a way that makes us only as vulnerable as we choose to be–a freedom that makes the conversation both possible and fruitful. We can explore our own identities in relation to other teachers' without ever feeling that we are being told to do our work in someone else's way.

The "critical moments" exercise offers a simple illustration of how leaders can establish an inviting expectation of free exchange about teaching among independent people.

The human condition. A second topic for good talk about good teaching is the human condition of teachers and learners. An

obsession with technique often leads us to ignore the human dynamics of the classroom. But when we reflect on teaching in a more open−ended way (as in the critical moments exercise), we soon see that our response to any given moment depends primarily on what is happening inside of usñand on how we diagnose what is happening inside our studentsñand only secondarily on the methods at our command. Good teaching depends less on technique than it does on the human condition of the teacher, and only by knowing the truth of our own condition can we hope to know the true condition of our students.

Let me illustrate. As I speak with faculty about the human condition, I am increasingly convinced that one of the biggest barriers to good teaching is our diagnosis of students today. Briefly stated, this diagnosis holds that the classroom behaviors of many students (e.g., their silence, distraction, and embarrassment) reveal them to be essentially brain−dead (due to poor preparation, the dissolution of decent society, MTV, etc.), and that they therefore require pedagogies that function like life−support systems, dripping information into the veins of comatose patients who are unable to feed themselves. If that is a caricature, it is nevertheless instructive: nothing is easier than to slip into a low opinion of students, and that opinion creates teaching practices guaranteed to induce vegetative states even in students who arrive for class alive and well.

I believe we need a deeper diagnosis of those classroom behaviors that we so cavalierly classify as "brain−dead"; that those behaviors can in fact be more powerfully explained by the ancient aspect of the human condition called "fear." Young people in this society live with a level of fear that is nearly invisible to their eldersñfear that their lives have little meaning, that their futures are dim, and that their elders do not care about their plight. The young have been thoroughly marginalized by the elders of this society, and their deepest response is not an angry rejection of us but a fearful internalization of our rejection of them. This fear leads them to hide behind masks of silence and indifference in the classroomñthe same silence that marginalized people have always practiced in the presence of people with power.

I realize that many of our students are not chronologically "young"; they have returned to school in mid−life. But I believe that much of my diagnosis applies to this group as well. Though our image of non−traditional students is often of self−confidence and expressiveness, it may be that adult learners are simply mature enough to know how to mask their fears. Their return to school is often triggered by an experience of marginalizationña divorce, the death of a spouse, the failure of a career. These students relate to their teachers as "elders" even if the age difference is reversed, and they can be as fearful of the teacher's response as the young often are.

To diagnose our students well, we must diagnose ourselves. Why are we, the mentors, unable to see the fear within our students? Why do we insist, instead, on accusing them of banality? The answer, I think, has to do with our own fearfulness: we cannot see the fears that haunt our students because we ourselves are haunted by the fear that our students have rejected us. One of the occupational hazards of college teaching is to walk into classroom after classroom, year after year, and look out upon a sea of faces that seems to be saying, "You're out of it." We take this silence and apparent indifference personally, and we defend ourselves against the implicit judgment on our lives by declaring our judges intellectually and morally bankrupt.

Our fear of the judgment of our students helps account for the tendency of too many academics to grow more cynical about students and teaching as the years go by; we are growing a shell of self−protection. But once we "decode" the fear that is in our students, and in ourselves, we find alternatives to cynicism. Once we understand the fearful condition of teachers and learners, the classroom can become a place where fear is faced and overcome.

I know of no technique to overcome fear. But I do know that whenever I can see past my students' silence and into their fearñand can teach to their fear rather than to their alleged indifferenceñmy students learn more. I also know that I cannot see my students' fear until I have seen my own. And I know that I am less likely to face

my own fear if I do not have a community of honest and open colleagues with whom to explore my struggles as a teacher.

The human condition is vast and varied, and fear is only one of its faces. But whether the focus is fear or power or ego, or grace or humility or love, an effort to understand the inner lives of teachers and learners not only makes for compelling conversation but for better teaching and learning as well.

Metaphors and images. A third approach to good talk about good teaching is to explore metaphors and images about who we are, what we are doing and what we would like to be and doñwhen we teach.

The ultimate source of good teaching lies not in technique but in the identity of the teacher, in those persistent but obscure forces that constitute oneís nature. There is no empirical science for determining one's nature. There is only the indirectness of imagination and poetry and art, and that is the value of metaphor: it offers us a way of glimpsing from the corner of the eye things that elude us when we try to view them directly. By articulating and exploring the metaphors that arise when we reflect on our own teaching, we touch the deep dimensions of self and vocation that defy headlong analysis.

This process is not as precious as I may have just made it sound, as my own case will illustrate. Early in my teaching career, I had a persistent, unromantic, and intellectually embarrassing image of myself as teaching "like a sheepdog," more specifically, like a border collie. Though the image seemed insane to me at the time, I now understand that it was an apt and amusing challenge to my actual practice as a young teacher: sheepdogs do not normally do their work by standing on their hind legs behind a podium and lecturing non−stop to the sheep. It took me years to appreciate that this strange metaphor was calling me to new insights about my work, insights more consistent with my own nature as teacher and learner.

I worked doggedly (sorry) to unpack the metaphor, looking, for

example, at the various functions a sheepdog performs: allowing the sheep to feed, protecting them from danger, keeping them together, guiding them toward shelter, etc. How does a sheepdog do these things? By creating an invisible but firmly enforced boundary around the sheep, by holding them within a space where they have a certain freedom within a certain discipline and demand.

Eventually, that became the key to my own best work as a teacher: I needed to learn how to create a learning space for my students, a space in which they could "feed" themselves by moving freely within limits, limits created by the demands of subject matter and by my own sense of what they needed to learn about that subject matter. That insight alone became an immense challenge. The image of teaching that I had absorbed from the academy requires the professor not to *create* space but to fill it up, a task I had learned to perform with a vengeance.

Over the years, the metaphor has continued to unfold for me. I began asking deeper questions about what needed to happen within the space I was creating. Unlike the sheepdog, who wants unquestioning obedience from the sheep, I wanted my students to come into selfhood and community within that spaceñnot just any form of community, but a learning community, one in which the interactions between students and teacher are disciplined by the subject that is at the center of our circle.

As time went by, the seemingly crude sheepdog metaphor evolved into an image that continues to help me teach from my own deepest identity: "To teach is to create a space in which the community of truth is practiced." There is a sophistication about this image that seems far removed from the sheepdog. But had I not taken the metaphor seriously, I do not think I would have evolved an image of teaching that speaks so deeply to my condition and that continues to challenge me in daily practice.

Sometimes, in the workshops I do with faculty, we combine the "critical moments" exercise with an exploration of metaphors. After we have talked "rationally" for a while about how to handle a particular critical moment (e.g., a moment of classroom conflict), I

will invoke one of the metaphors the group has previously identified (we've worked with images ranging from a wilderness guide to a CEO to a weather system) and ask, "How would a _____ respond to that?" When the conversation about critical moments moves from practical strategy to the realm of metaphorical imagination, what happens is often remarkable. We reveal ourselves at levels that makes us vulnerable to real growth, and we discern solutions that no rational strategy could generate.

In short, talking about teaching through metaphors can make us available to ourselves, and to each other, in fresh and surprising ways. They are antidotes, if you will, to our "theories" of teaching, whichñvaluable as they may beñare also subject to sophisticated self–deceptions that mask who we really are and what we're really up to. The gift of honest metaphor is that it comes to us rough and raw and full of psychic energy, unedited by the conventions of the rational mind. If I give you my metaphor, I am likely to be speaking honestly about myselfñin ways that even I do not understand until I have listened carefully to what the metaphor is trying to teach me.

Great teachers. A fourth focus for good talk about good teaching that can take us beyond technique involves telling stories about the origins of our teaching vocationsñespecially stories about the great teachers who set us on this path.

Sharing something of each other's stories is a minimum essential for community (the more you know of some one's story, the less possible it is to hate him or her), and yet we rarely do it in academic life. Perhaps we would do more of it if we understood how it can help us do our work better. By telling the stories of our great teachers, we can team much about the shape of good teaching, and we may reconnect with the passions that led us to teach in the first place–passions long lost in the demands of daily life.

In the more extended faculty workshops I do, I begin by inviting the participants to tell such stories, and the exercise quickly goes beyond self–introductions or "breaking the ice." As the stories are told, we are reminded that good teaching comes in an astonishing array of forms. More deeply, we are reminded that while great

teachers may have mastered a particular method of teaching, it was not the method that mattered: it was the congruence between that method and the teacher's identity that made the teaching great.

As one listens to these stories, one hears less about the technical virtuosity of these teachers than about their personhoodñabout their presence and passion and commitment, about their capacity to "live the questions" that they asked others to consider. But just as there is no common technique among great teachers, so there is no common personality profile. The personhood that makes for great teaching comes in many forms; some great teachers are testy and some are infinitely patient, some are noisy and flamboyant while others are quiet and calm. What they have in common is self–knowledge, trust in their own nature, and a willingness to teach directly from it.

These observations sound like truisms only until one seeks their implications for one's own teachingñthen they become challenging demands. In one workshop where participants told stories of their great teachers, a professor became visibly moved as he talked about the mentor who had turned him toward teaching. Over the next few days, the source of his emotion became clear: he had spent 15 years trying to ape his mentor's teaching style, even though he and his mentor were quite different kinds of people. He had spent 15 years trying to be someone he was not, and both he and his teaching had suffered from the effort. He was a man haunted by the feelings of fraudulence that threaten American professional life more generally.

Behind the attempt to imitate someone else there lies, of course, a lack of trust in one's own gifts. This professor is not alone in his self–distrust. There is little in our formation and development as academics that invites us to examine, let alone to understand and value our selfhood; indeed, a good case can be made that one function of graduate education is to replace any sense of the unique subjective self with a standard–issue guild identity. Some of us will grow as teachers only as we recover our sense of identity and learn to trust it as we teach. Recalling the roots of our own vocations by sharing autobiographies can help that process along.

Ground Rules for Creative Conversation

If we are to move past privatization toward good talk about good teaching, not only do we need leaders to invite that conversation into being and topics that take us beyond technique; we also need ground rules for dialogue that will keep us from killing the conversation before it even begins.

The tacit ground rules that have 	traditionally shaped academic dialogue are much like the "rules of engagement" practiced by the militaryñways of putting a civilized veneer on behavior that is nonetheless barbaric. We 	have a hard time talking to each other without falling into competition and

even combat, into an unconscious rhythm of defense and offense that allows for little openness and growth. (In the middle of writing this essay, I received a solicitation to subscribe to a higher education journal. It highlighted this blurb from an academic dean: "I need to read _____ in order not to be blindsided by someone who has.") Good talk about good

teaching requires a conscious effort to alter the norms that shape our dialogue so that its outcomes can be more creative.

For example, in faculty workshops I sometimes ask for volunteers to offer course design problems as case studies for work in groups of six or eight peers. Volunteering to do so entails a riskña vulnerabilityñsince it exposes the inner sanctum of one's teaching to the scrutiny of others in a way that can set us up to be used and abused. So, to make the process more trustworthy, I have devised simple ground rules that govern the small groups.

The groups meet for an hour and a half, and during that time no one can speak to the "focus person" in any way except to ask an honest, open question. That is, no one can advise the focus person on how he or she ought to teach the course, and no one can ask questions that are advice or judgment in disguise: "Don't you think you should assign Schwartz's brilliant essay on this issue? You don't

know his work? Oh, don't you read German?" For the final 15 minutes, the "questions–only" rule can be suspended if the focus person requests it, and he or she can invite "mirroring" from the groupñnot judgment or gratuitous advice, but reflections on what the questioners think they have heard the focus person saying.

When the faculty I work with hear about these ground rules, they have mixed feelingsñdisgust and despair. How could anything worthwhile happen when we are forbidden from arguing and making points? But when the small groups have finished their work, most participants have not only learned important things about teaching; they have experienced a rare sense of community with colleagues.

The focus persons often say that they have never had better help in thinking through a course than comes from a process that gives them a safe space to explore their own experience and identity. The questioners often say that they have never listened to a colleague so carefully, that they understand anew how teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher, and that what constitutes good teaching for one person may have little to do with another. The questioners also speak of gaining new insight into themselves, of seeing problems and potentials in their own teaching in the process of taking another person seriously.

The "questions–only" rule is radical, and I do not suggest that we need to follow such a draconian drill every time we gather. But people who want to encourage good talk about good teaching must find ways to change the dance that we academics tend to do with each other, so that we spend less time stepping on each other's toes. We need ways to listen more openly to each other; to judge and advise and "fix" each other much less; to find the strengthsñnot just the weaknessesñin each other's proposals; to leave each other feeling heard and affirmed as well as stretched and challenged when our conversations end.

Every faculty I have ever visited contains a wealth of wisdom about teaching that waits to be tapped. If we would practice these modest graces of conversation, encouraged by leaders who invite us and by

topics that engage us, good talk about teaching will flourishñand good teaching will have a better chance to flourish as well.

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